

**Address The Toddler In The Room:
Five Ways You Can Use Humor To Connect With Your Team Virtually
By David Horning**

To say that the last year has been an ‘uphill battle’ makes all of those barefoot grandparents walking in the snow look like a bunch of wimps. Sure, it may’ve been uphill both ways, but was it in the middle of a pandemic in the midst of political polarization not seen for decades?

At least they got to walk *somewhere*.

Many of us have been working from home and haven’t seen a coworker *NOT* through a screen in over a year. I’ve only spoken to one live audience since March 10, 2020, so even though I’ve been able to use virtual platforms to share the value of humor as a creative and collaborative leadership tool, leaders are having a hard time fathoming how to apply the concepts with a workforce who hasn’t worked in the same building in many fortnights.

At first, I was resistant to the idea of speaking virtually – I’m a people person! The thought of not being able to meet with audiences before and after a program was overwhelming: “I guess I’ll just never meet anyone new ever again.”

Within a year, not only have I learned to use the chat feature, breakout rooms, polls, and screen sharing to create a more immersive audience experience, I’ve fully leaned into connecting with complete strangers with a simple question, “Care for a coffee chat over Zoom?” Not only have I met *dozens* of new people I would’ve never had the chance to meet, but there is also little to no risk of being lured into a van with candy.

See, mom? I *can* talk to strangers.

But the most valuable unexpected outcome of this new outreach strategy is what I’ve learned from some of the folks to whom I’ve been lucky enough to connect. These are CEOs, CHROs, founders, Chief Fun Officers, and other leaders of varying titles who have found new ways to engage their teams using humor without ever leaving their homes. How, you ask? Here are 6 ideas.

1. Online humor database

Just because you can’t laugh together in a room doesn’t mean you can’t laugh together and still create a shared experience. Lean into technology to keep things light – start a Slack channel where your team can share funny videos, memes, articles, etc., so that at any time, anyone can access it when they need a laugh. Establish guidelines based on your company’s values, mission, and vision to determine what content is appropriate. Trust your people to contribute positively and they’ll more than likely contribute positively. If you *must* moderate, be direct with the inappropriate poster by asking, “Out of curiosity, how did you think this post fell within our values when you posted it?”

2. “No Regrets”

Birmingham, Alabama-based app developer Airship is starting a Slack channel where employees can share their failures, or “ragrets,” and laugh at them together. Though showcasing shortcomings may seem counterproductive, it has three valuable side effects when done correctly: it humanizes leadership, it connects everyone from all departments through the common experience of failure, and it frames failures as learning lessons in a new, fun way, thus eliminating the stigma that all failure is negative. Once a week, set aside a few extra minutes if people want to share their failures, how they laughed, what they learned, and how they’ll adapt.

3. Monday Fondays

Yes, that’s still pronounced ‘funday.’

Reframe “Just another Monday” as a day where people actually look forward to logging onto their computer. Open the week on a positive creative note by playing a quick five-minute improv game. For example, go around the “room” and talk only in questions with each individual responding to the previous person’s question with a question. Create a made-up problem, accept anonymous ideas, pick the most outlandish one, and go around the room in agreement on *why* that idea will work. Never say “no,” never show your “but,” and always add to *why* the worst idea you ever heard is the *best* idea you’ve ever heard. Then when you get to the meat of the meeting, their brains are primed to see possibility.

4. Address the toddler in the room

I have attended so many webinars, meetings, conferences, etc. where NO ONE has their cameras on. When I ask why, the answers always involve a messy room, family in the background, a cat sitting directly in front of the camera, a bad hair day, or something else in that range of excuses. All the more reason why you should turn your camera ON!

For too long coworkers, bosses, and employees have been nothing more than job titles and descriptions, which takes some of the humanity out of our interactions.

Enough’s enough!

Acknowledge the mess, laugh about your wet hair, introduce the team to Snowball. It will make you more human, and in a time where we can’t connect in-person, let’s address the elephant in the room – or toddler, in this case – and behave like actual people for once. Maybe you’ll find common ground with a coworker you’ve never once talked to.

5. Hire the toddler in the room

Working from home means the person in the “office” next door may be audibly screaming and crying, though for some of us that *could* be an upgrade from your work neighbor. If an employee has to deal with a dirty diaper or a toddler demanding attention, that’s part of their job now. Be flexible if someone needs to hop off a call – what good will they be if they’re distracted and stressed, anyway? Keep your Zoom door open, and if that person missed something, invite them back when things are calm – they’ll be grateful for it.

Though work today isn't traditional by any means, there are so many ways to connect using humor. If you want to learn more about the power of humor in the workplace, check out my recent webinar, "[Humor Leadership 101](#)." In this free 60-minute virtual workshop you'll discover why humor can be a powerful tool in inspiring creativity, productivity, and a collaborative workplace culture.